

EXPERIENCING AN EXPERIENCE-BASED LEARNING APPROACH TO SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION

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The four year social work degree program at the University of Newcastle, NSW, Australia celebrates its first decade this year. The program began as, and has remained firmly grounded on, an experience-based model of learning. In 1993 the five members of the teaching team received an Excellence in Teaching Award from the University of Newcastle. There are now 8 full-time faculty and about 40 students in each of the four years of the full-time program. The author, one of the three inaugural faculty, reflects on her experience of applying this model of learning to social work practice.

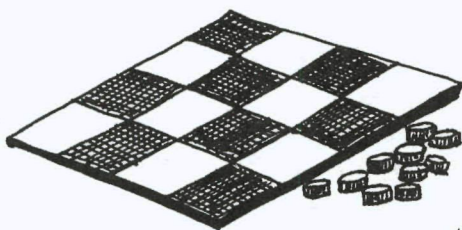
My first experience of teaching was as a thirteen year old teaching Sunday School and trying to instill in a mob of unruly kids a mish-mash of muddled Christianity with no sense of why it might be relevant or important or even interesting, and no understanding of the difference between beliefs and facts. Teaching Sunday school consisted of having as many tricks as possible to keep kids quiet and happy: games, coloured pens, pictures, prizes. It's not surprising that from that time forward I never wanted to teach, seeing it as some sort of nightmare struggle to maintain control amidst chaos.

Many years later as a social work practitioner in health care, I was called upon as one of several experienced group workers to put together the group skills course for the new medical school at

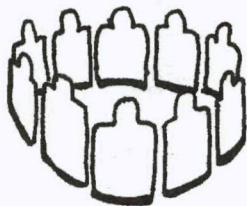
Newcastle University. The medical course was breaking new ground in Australia by using a problem-based learning model. This was the first time I came into contact with the idea that education theories and models were as diverse as the theories and models of social work. In first-year medicine, students began to work in small groups of about 10 students on real problems and issues of medical practice. The challenge was to assist them in developing the group process skills they would

need to undertake their tasks. Faculty of the medical school recognised that social workers had this expertise and employed a number of us to both write the group skills component of the course and be group facilitators in that part of the program. I was reminded that many skills social workers took for granted, such as empathic listening, group facilitation, and problem-solving, were highly valued and coveted by other professions.

Over the years, Newcastle University became very well known for its problem-based learning model in medicine and later in architecture. So when Brian English, the founding professor of the New School of Social Work, took up his appointment in July 1990, he was in a setting conducive to designing and implementing a four year degree program using a problem-based learning model. After nearly 20 years in social work education, with a research background in family demography and a passion for photography and motor bikes, Brian wanted to take a different and creative approach to the development of the course. He was critical of what social work education had become and, in the experiential learning tradition of Dewey, he wanted to focus on the process rather than the content of learning. Making social work practice the central organising feature of the course, he selected his new faculty members for their substantial social work practice backgrounds.



I joined the department as one of three foundation staff in November 1990. Although I had never wanted to be a teacher, I had been a field educator, a supervisor of social workers, a coordinator of staff development programs, and a tutor in the medical school program. Newcastle, a large industrial city, is my home town and the city where I had practised as a social worker for 15 years. I was incredulous that, after many years of lobbying, the local branch of the Social Work Association had finally managed to convince the University to start a school in social work and excited that there was a possibility that the region could address its chronic shortage of qualified social workers. It was like a dream to then be offered the opportunity to work with people I admired with an open charter to develop a course to produce the sort of social workers I thought were needed in the field. I was not going to let it pass, even though I still had great reservations about being a teacher. I could never have entered academia if I had been expected to lecture, to stand up in front of a classroom of students as an expert and tell them what I thought they needed to know. However, the possibility of teaching in a workshop format as a facilitator, rather than as a lecturer, appealed. Group facilitation had always been both my interest and my particular skill.



It was a memorable first few months. The city of Newcastle was recovering from its first major earthquake (in December 1989), and many of the buildings at the University were still under repair. In January 1991 as we prepared to take our first students, the Gulf War began. It is hard to describe the seeming in-

significance of our ideas as we gathered around the radio and wondered how relevant social work education would be if the world erupted in war. The air of world crisis probably aided our creativity and preparedness to depart from traditions, because it was immediately obvious that teaching content to students may not prepare them for whatever their world would be in four years time.

Moving from practice into academia required a long period of personal adjustment for me, some of which was painful and depressing. I left a high profile practice career of 18 years and a senior position in an agency in which I had a lot of status and influence because of the programs I had developed and run. I entered academia with none of the qualities valued in this new culture: a doctorate, a publishing record, and research grants. For a long time I felt like a non-person and spent a lot of money at the naturopath trying to deal with my 'fatigue'. I missed working with client groups and was embarrassed to acknowledge this: was it ethical to have received so much gratification from working with people in trouble? Students did not offer equivalent rewards and were very inclined to complain a lot about everything and to be very challenging to someone very fragile in her teacher status. I missed my colleagues from health services. Although organizational relationships are never perfect, I realised that in all my years in health services, our focus had been on service and on the client. Most of my professional colleagues had had reasonably good interpersonal skills. It was a shock to join the larger academic community and to be with people who seemed so focused on themselves and the advancement of their career, that they might not even acknowledge you if you passed them in the corridor.

The initial group of three faculty began the process of developing the course with a commitment to a four-year full-time program and an 'experience-based' model. Like other social work programs that set out to imple-

ment problem-based learning, our initial problem was with the word 'problem'. This did not reflect a strengths approach that we thought was a fundamental principle of social work practice. We settled for the term 'experience-based', seeing it as representing Dewey's original ideas about education for social justice, education by 'doing', and respecting that students bring their own knowledge and experience to their education. Then, setting aside all our knowledge and experience of social work education as we had known it, we spent many hours articulating what we considered to be good social work practice. Having been social workers for many years, we had many firm ideas about this. The first curriculum planning was, therefore, not based on traditional notions of social work education, but began from our own experiences and observations of the strengths and weaknesses of social workers in the field.

My involvement in experience-based learning has made it incomprehensible to me that social work is taught in any other way. A profession that is concerned with social justice, empowerment, skills, and process requires a congruent model of education. So many social work skills are those highly valued in an experience-based model of learning: reflection, self awareness, observation, critical thinking, problem solving, and group work. We live in a world where knowledge and information are immediately accessible in large quantities and changing on a daily basis. All we can do is to equip students with the skills to sort through and apply this knowledge in order to make sound judgments about the situations they encounter. When I came to read more about Dewey, seen to be the originator of an experience-based approach, I was excited to find that he had been a close associate of Jane Addams and one of the first trustees of Hull House. He acknowledged Addams' influence on his thinking and they each participated in the other's programs.

In our experience-based model, each learning unit (about 60 class hours) begins with a 'trigger experience'. After the 'trigger', student groups, with a facilitator, reflect on their feelings and thoughts and examine their values, beliefs, and assumptions. The facilitated group process creates safety to express honest thoughts and feelings as well as challenges students to consider alternative views. Students are then provided with learning themes, goals, and group and individual tasks. The course focuses on assisting students to develop the skills required to undertake the tasks: library, internet, and literature searching and appraising; drama workshops to develop creativity; input on critical reasoning skills; written and oral presentation skills; and interpersonal and groupwork skills. Students present their group task to the rest of the class and the reflection and feedback from this experience is also used as a major part of learning.



As a facilitator of the experiential learning process, I encounter many challenges. I expend much anxiety and creative energy devising new and currently relevant 'trigger' sessions that will engage students. The trigger may be a visiting (a jail or juvenile detention centre, going to the local shopping centre in a wheelchair, attending clubhouse programs for people with a mental illness); attending a session run by consumers or people from a particular client group (people who are deaf, people with acquired brain injury, or people recovering from substance abuse); watching a relevant documentary or current news program or a play about a social issue; reading a piece of literature or an autobiography. The session should confront students,

engage their experience, and cause them to challenge their beliefs, values, and assumptions. It should be a powerful and memorable learning experience. 'Processing' the trigger session in the large group is one of the most exciting and rewarding parts of this model of learning for me. Just as in group work in social work practice, I am working with the immediate experience of the class group and drawing their initial learning from this.

A second year unit, with one of its themes 'work in society', involved a visit of about 30 students and 3 faculty to the blast furnace of the local steelworks. The idea was to confront students with the day-to-day working conditions of people in heavy industry as a trigger to their examining the role of work in people's lives and in the distribution of wealth in society. It was hard to recognise each other behind the hard hats, heavy woollen coats, and safety glasses as we tramped through that fiery and hell-like environment. The steelworks (which has since closed) had been the major employer in this city for the last century. Many of the students' fathers and grandfathers had begun their working lives there. Students (and faculty!) were shocked by the harshness and danger of the working conditions and brought this experience to their campus learning.

Devising group tasks is more difficult. A task has to relate to current practice, to engage students' interest, to be current, and to have embedded in it the need for students to seek particular knowledge and to acquire practice skills. A task might be the planning, organization, and running of a meeting to gain community support for the establishment of a drug rehabilitation facility in a local area (a real and current local issue), which the students will prepare and then run using other members of the class as their 'community'.

I find it hard to strike an appropriate balance between facilitating the small groups as they work on their tasks and leaving them to be 'self directed'. It is not intended that all of

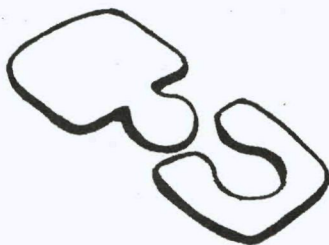
the small group time be facilitated by faculty, so we are not always aware, until they present their task, that a group may have misunderstood an important aspect of the issue. They can experience this as being 'set up'. Much of my current learning is in developing better ways to assist students to deal with the process of doing, critically reflecting on and learning from feedback, in the face of their expectations that tasks will have outcomes specified by faculty and therefore perfectible by students. It is certainly easier to tell students how to do something than to encourage them to find and then struggle with the material they need to grasp in order to successfully do the task. Two areas I continue to work on are to further integrate field placements with campus learning and social work research as progressive learning within each of the practice-based learning units.

For five years in the middle of the ten-year development of this degree, I worked part-time on my Ph.D. With this completed, I finally achieved a sense of entitlement in academic culture. I had entered the survivors club. I had demonstrated that I was capable of the self-discipline of several sustained years of focused learning, research, and writing, and had joined 'the others'. With this came new confidence as a teacher. For the first time, in that first semester after completing the thesis, I began to enjoy teaching and to relax with students. Feedback from students such as 'chill out' and 'why don't faculty use their practice skills more in the classroom' helped as well. I could finally let go of the vestiges of my need to control the classroom and work with whatever was happening in the students' learning process. My anxieties about our existing program in critical thinking skills led to a university grant to further develop this area of our program.

The joys I now experience in continuing to develop and teach in this course derive from the practice context of the learning, the group work, the emphasis on creativity, and the free-

dom to change the content of learning modules over time, keeping pace with current social issues. Our experience-based approach encourages learning through working with group process in the classroom ('being where the student is at') and there is freedom to spend more time, if required, to explore in greater depth issues of immediate concern or puzzlement to students. Best of all is the noise and laughter. Walking down the sombre corridors of the university and hearing animated debate or raucous laughter bursting forth from a room, I know it will be one of our classes with the students thoroughly engaged in some aspect of their learning. We have even had the occasional complaint from other departments about the noise emanating from our classrooms and lots of complaints about the furniture being rearranged.

This is not to say that an experience-based program is always joyful. Like all university courses, ours has its share of difficult students, grievances, and challenges to our learning approach. What do our students find difficult and complain about the most? Self-directed learning requires them to take a great deal of responsibility for their reading and research in relation to each learning unit. Not all students like taking that responsibility, preferring the security of prescribed reading and activities. Despite the structural focus of our



course, many students still struggle to take a larger political perspective on the issues they encounter. Some students dislike small group work and all of them find dealing with the conflict that inevitably arises in small groups difficult.

The other day my class of students was revolting. Back after the Winter break, with some of them annoyed about receiving poor results from first semester assessments, restless and apathetic, they were a reminder of those long ago Sunday School classes. My old group work rule came into play: when it seems to be falling to pieces, process! So I said to them that I could see that they were 'out of sorts' and I wondered if they would be prepared to tell me what that was all about. Out it all came: they had no confidence that they were learning their theories and able to apply them to practice. Many of them had received comments on their last assignments that were critical of their grasp of the theories and they were concerned about this. They were not finding it easy to learn theory through their independent reading and then application to case studies in class. I listened. I managed to stop myself from being defensive. Some students wanted lectures on theories. The discussion proceeded and I kept facilitating, resisting an overwhelming urge to suggest solutions. Having clarified what the problem was, the students themselves began to come up with possible solutions. They eventually decided that they would like to have a 'theory' day once a week with a specific theory designated for those days. They would come to class having done preparatory reading on the theory and we would examine main tenets, strengths and limitations of the theory by applying it to a case study. This was not too different from how I had planned for students to learn theory, but it would go at a pace that they felt they could manage. We then went on to have a very energetic discussion about grief and loss theory and went away from the class thinking that learning theories was something we would be able to successfully do together.

I have come a long way from Sunday School when the only tool I had at my disposal was to entertain with toys, books, and games. There have been many times when I

could have succumbed to a failure of nerve about this model of education. I can see why innovative education has often reverted to just shovelling the information into students and having them regurgitate it back in their exams and assignments. But I have let go of the need to control. I have developed a strong sense of the common elements of social work and teaching: the personal growth that is part of both teaching and learning, the importance of process, the usefulness of group skills, the role of a strengths perspective, and a framework of social justice values. I am as energised and stimulated by teaching as I once was by social work practice. Still, there are many moments of self doubt, especially as the number of things I know nothing about seems to be increasing exponentially. However, most of the time I feel, almost 30 years into my career in social work, a sense of fulfillment to be a part of preparing the next generation of social workers and confident that the values and processes of social work remain as relevant as they have always been.

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